

Interview #5

Informant: Mr. Norman Craig, Health Educator, Pan-American Sanitary Bureau, Mexico, D.F.

Place: Biltmore Hotel, Los Angeles

Time: 11:00-12:00 a.m., December 10, 1956

N.C.: Dr. Rogers told me something about what you are going to be doing, but only an inkling.

H.A.: Let me fill you in on the details. But I so want to hear what you are going to be doing. I have a hunch that our work is going to be complementary.

N.C.: Yes.

H.A.: Well, you might say we began by looking out over the population of California, to find which population segments were failing to receive adequate public health and medical care services. It seemed to us that farm laborers of Mexican origin were receiving less than most other population groups. This group, in turn, breaks down into two sub-groups: the so-called "wetbacks," and contract workers, or braceros. We have received some research money -- actually two grants, one from the Hayes Foundation of Los Angeles, one from the National Institutes of Health. Our present plan is to spend the first six months or so studying the background -- the economic factors, legal, and so forth -- within which these people move while they are in the United States. Then, it was our thought that we would have to drop down into Mexico itself to find out many of the things we need to know. Presumably, as long as wetbacks remain in this country, as fugitives, they will be a bit reluctant to talk, particularly to someone with a quasi-official connection. There are certain difficulties, too, in talking with braceros as long as they are here. The sorts of things we want to find out from these persons are: some notion of their health status while they are in this country. Since we will be in no position to conduct medical examinations, this will be a subjective assessment, as seen by the informant himself. Put this in itself, we feel, is very important. We also want to find out what these people do when they are sick while in this country. And we ~~want~~ want to find out what they would like to do. On the basis of such information as this, we hope to weave together a systematic analysis and body of conclusions, including, particularly, recommendations as to how local health departments and other health workers might reach these farm workers more effectively with their programs.

N.C.: I wish we had had that kind of research to go on when I was associated with the bracero program.

H.A.: I didn't realize you had been. Was this some time ago?

N.C.: Yes, back in 1942-47. That was the first time the program was attempted. When it was revived in 1949, there were many changes.

H.A.: Yes. Then you took your degree at U.C. later?

N.C.: Yes, I got my M.P.H. at Cal in 1949. I worked for a time in Honduras (?), then in Guatemala. For the last couple of years I've been with WHO in Mexico City.

H.A.: I envy you. I'd like to do something of the sort someday myself.

N.C.: The program is coming to realize more and more the need for social scientists in their work. And not just anthropologists. Somebody like rural sociologists would be more useful, we think now.

H.A.: I forgot to mention, sociology is my field (laughter). That is, before I went into public health. I have master's degrees in both.

N.C.: When I was working in Guatemala, we had an anthropologist on our staff. A brilliant fellow, but he didn't give us exactly what we needed. American anthropologists have quite a different approach from Latin anthropologists, such as Dr. Aguirre Beltran at the Indian Institute. The American anthropologist wants to keep everything just as he finds it. He wants to build a wall around the native culture. People like Beltran want to understand the indigenous culture in order to destroy it. They are interested in creating one national culture.

H.A.: As you say, there are totally different philosophies there.

N.C.: What part of Mexico were you planning to go into?

H.A.: This will depend on what we find in our preliminary study on this side of the border. All I can say is that we want to go into a "typical" area which supplies agricultural laborers to this country. So far as we know at the present time, this will be in the Central Plateau Area, which is the principal agricultural area of Mexico, and which one would naturally expect to supply more migrants than the Northern states, which are so sparsely settled.

N.C.: Yes, Jalisco, Guanajuato, and Michoacan would probably be your best bets.

H.A.: We have been thinking in terms of Michoacan, but this is not at all definite yet.

N.C.: Would you expect to have your headquarters in the country, or where?

H.A.: I think we would want to have our office in a city, such as Morelia, but most of our field work would be done in the rural areas surrounding the city.

N.C.: Would you want a "virgin" population -- that is, one that hadn't exposed to a lot of health information before coming to this country?

H.A.: All I can say, again, is that we would like our study group to be as nearly representative as possible. If most of Mexico is "virginal," then we would want to move into a "virgin" area. Otherwise...

N.C.: I think you will find the only parts of Mexico which haven't been exposed to health propaganda are way up in the mountains. They would be people who never come to the United States anyway.

H.A.: That is what I would have expected.

N.C.: There are health programs going on all over Mexico. The only trouble is, there is very little system or coordination to all the activity. Everybody's doing something different. Take the Morelia area. In Patzcuaro, there is a Fundamental Education Training Center. They have tried to conduct a certain amount of health education in the area. The things they have taught have been really strange, really weird.

H.A.: So the people I might talk to in that vicinity would probably not be typical, as far as health attitudes are concerned?

N.C.: Far from typical. One thing in general that can be said about the health education work in Mexico to this point -- most of it is still pretty much wrapped up in the old idea that all you have to do is tack up posters (which most people can't read) and show some movies. Of course, from your point of view, this is probably good! (laughter)

H.A.: Yes, strictly from the standpoint of our study, this would mean a relatively "unsoiled" population.

N.C.: Our loss is your gain.

H.A.: Well, now, tell me something about this demonstration project I understand you are going to carry out in the near future.

N.C.: We are going to have teams working in the state of Guanajuato, with assessment to see which techniques work best, and so forth. It is to be a five year affair. The administrative machinery is being set up right now, and the program activities will be starting very soon. When did you say you think you might be getting down to Mexico?

H.A.: Probably not before the fall of 1957. And this brings to my mind a very important question, which you may or may not feel that you can answer. I am aware of the fact that the number of Mexican nations who come to this country for agricultural work is in a constant state of flux. Two or three years ago, the number of wetbacks was very great. Now, I understand, the wetbacks have dropped off, and the number of braceros has correspondingly increased. Perhaps next year, the number of both will dwindle to next nothing, in which case we would be studying a dead issue. Do you have any ideas on this?

N.C.: Well, things are getting better in Mexico. Many people used to come North between seasons, but now the Mexican Government is trying to provide more continuous work.

H.A.: I hope I am not indulging in wishful thinking, but it seems to me that large agricultural employers in the U.S. have been geared to a labor supply from Mexico for so many years that for some years to come they are going to continue to have them, whether they have to do it legally or illegally. I know there have been beginnings of importing workers from Japan, the Philippines, the West Indies, etc., but all those programs are just drops in the bucket compared to the half million or more workers that come in from Mexico every year. Am I just bolstering up my own morale?

N.C.: No, that sounds reasonable. I know of villages in Guanajuato, where we will be doing our project, that are accustomed to having all their able-bodied men -- 100% of them -- come to the U.S. when things are slack down there.

H.A.: But the Mexican Government can cut off the bracero program any time it wants to.

N.C.: The U.S. employers will always be happy to hire wetbacks. They only have to pay them half as much.

H.A.: Well, I'm going to keep my fingers crossed. I'd hate to get down there and find I was studying a thing of the past. Our project is scheduled to last two and a half years, you know.

N.C.: I don't think you need to worry.

H.A.: I hope you're right. Well, now, another point on which you may be able to help us has to do with the staff we envisage. We hope to have a secretary who is bilingual, and we will also need two interviewers. Do you think we will be able to get qualified people? By qualified, I don't mean with a background in social science, or anything like that, necessarily, but with common sense, more than anything else.

N.C.: There are secretaries, although the bilingual part may be a problem. You might be able to get someone from one of the other projects.

H.A.: What sort of salary do you think we ought to plan on?

N.C.: Oh, about 1,500 pesos a month, depending on where you had your headquarters, and so forth.

H.A.: That would ~~be~~ be about \$125 American, wouldn't it?

N.C.: Just about.

H.A.: What about interviewers.

N.C.: There are a number of places you might look for them. There's a school of social work in Monterrey, and another in Mexico City. I don't think they would have had much training in interviewing, though. There's the Indian Institute. There's the Institute of Anthropology at the National University. I should think the anthropology students might be good...

H.A.: Surely.

N.C.: Of course, if you get someone who is too sophisticated, you may find them putting their own interpretations on the informant's statements.

H.A.: This is a problem, all right. On the other hand, obviously there are certain advantages in having a person with a good deal of sophistication. Let's just say that we'll see how she goes. I doubt if we'll be in a position to pick and choose too much.

N.C.: That's probably right. Say, I'll tell you a person you should talk to. Her name's Ofelia Quintana. She's American, of Mexican parentage. She's a nurse who went through the course at the Fundamental Education Training Center in Patzcuaro. She wants to get into some type of work which will use this background. Reba Haig can tell you how to get in touch with her, I think. There's another fellow who went through the course at Patzcuaro currently going for his doctorate in anthropology ~~now~~ at Stanford. There are also a couple of Mexican-American nurses currently taking the course at Patzcuaro.

H.A.: That sounds like a really good lead. Let me get back for a moment to the work you were doing with the bracero program back in the '40's, if you don't mind. Could you tell me a little about the health services which were provided?

N.C.: Doctors came in regularly and provided a clinic service. The through cases were referred to specialists in nearby cities.
service

H.A.: Were these Public Health/Physicians who came in?

N.C.: No, private practitioners whose services were contracted under the program. I must say that I blush as I look back on my ignorance of that time. I knew nothing about the folk medicine of Mexico, and so when these folks came in with complaints that the doctors and I had never heard of, we could only conclude they were either lazy or a little touched in the head. It ended with the doctors giving them colored aspirin for almost everything...

H.A.: Things like empacho, mal ojo...

N.C.: Yes, and bilis. Of course, the poor braceros were no happier about the whole thing than we were. They ended up, many of them, by going to practitioners in town who put on a little ceremony -- you know, "see your own heart and lungs working," things like that. They had to pay for it out of their own pockets, but I guess it was more similar to what they were used to in their own culture.

H.A.: I'm glad you brought this up, because, actually, as I see it, folk medicine is the very heart of our study. Many other people, of course, have looked into Mexican folk medicine, but we hope to systematize it in a new way, slanted toward our practical problem.

N.C.: We are interested in the same things in our Guanajuato project. We want to learn how much health attitudes change while braceros are in the United States, whether they remain changed when they return to Mexico, and whether they serve as an instrument in changing the attitudes of others. I'm sure you are going to be of great assistance to us.

H.A.: Oh, I'm sure we'll gain at least as much from you.

N.C.: Health departments in Mexico, by the way, are now pretty thoroughly committed to working certain appropriate elements from folk medicine into their programs. It was a long struggle to get the physicians down there and in Central America to see things our way, but I think we have that battle won now.

H.A.: The question now is whether we can persuade doctors and others here in this country to make similar changes.

N.C.: Yes, that's the problem. I wish you luck!

H.A.: Have you any suggestions as to the conduct of our study? You weren't too happy about the Patzcuaro area. Is there any specific place you'd suggest we might do well to locate in?

N.C.: Up around Uruapan, that's near Paricutin, the volcano, might be a good area. Or down around _____, between Morelia and Mexico City.

H.A.: Please keep in mind that our plans are extremely fluid at this stage, so we are completely open to suggestions and criticisms. And we have some little time yet before we have to make our final decision.

N.C.: When you do decide where you would like to go, we can be of some help to you, introducing you to Ministry of Health people, getting letters of introduction for you, and so forth.

H.A.: I take it the PASB is well thought of down there.

N.C.: Very much so.

H.A.: I wonder, though, if it would be such a good idea to become associated with the Mexican government, any more than with the American government. From what I understand, the people down there are apt to identify government workers with tax collection, and may be less communicative than if I passed myself off as a plain student or something of the sort.

N.C.: The villagers wouldn't have to know that you had letters of introduction to the mayor, and the local health officer. And if you didn't have such letters, it might be even harder for you to get along.

H.A.: I see. You think it will be possible for me to have it both ways.

N.C.: Yes.

H.A.: Well, Mr. Craig, I know you have to be running along. Let me just ask one more thing. Can you give me any suggestions as to people I should see at this stage of the game -- people to provide the background on economics, legal aspects, and so forth?

(There followed a discussion of resource persons.)

add anecdote about unprovidence of
braceros - lack of long term
goals.